

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 620

CS 502 629

AUTHOR Owen, William F.
 TITLE Interpersonal Communication Competence: A Transcultural Model.
 PUB DATE 79
 NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Meeting of the Communication Association of the Pacific (Honolulu, HI, July 30-August 1, 1979)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Cultural Differences; *Cultural Factors; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Competence; *Interpersonal Relationship; Models; Research Needs; Role Perception
 IDENTIFIERS Communication Research

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critique of current conceptualizations of interpersonal competence, reveals their underlying cultural prescriptions, and proposes a transcultural model of interpersonal communication competence designed to guide the teaching of interpersonal communication as well as research in that area. (FL)

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**Interpersonal Communication Competence:
A Transcultural Model**

William F. Owen

Department of Speech Communication DE-05

University of Washington

Seattle, Washington 98195

**Paper Presented at the Annual International Convention of the
Communication Association of the Pacific**

Honolulu, Hawaii

July 30-August 1, 1979

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Interpersonal Communication Competence: A Transcultural Model

Interpersonal communication competence has been a topic of recent concern in speech communication literature. Most writings have focused upon forming the concept (Foote & Cottrell, 1955; Argyle & Kendon, 1967; Weinstein, 1969), prescribing skills (Argyris, 1965, 1968; Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Wieman, 1977), while some have shown an interest in contextualizing the concept (Cronen et al., 1979; Philipson, 1975, 1976; Wieman, 1978). However, little attention has been given to a systematic critique of the cultural prescriptions inhering in most of the current conceptualizations of interpersonal competence. Similarly, with few exceptions (Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Cronen et al., 1979), little emphasis has been placed on the implications that the concept has on the teaching of interpersonal communication. Therefore, the purposes of this paper are to present a critique of current conceptualizations of interpersonal competence, to reveal the underlying cultural prescriptions, and to propose a transcultural model of interpersonal communication competence which should guide the teaching of interpersonal communication as well as research in this area.

Philipson is among the few who has recognized the need for studying the cultural relativity and "situational appropriateness" of communicative behavior (1975, p. 13). In his two-year ethnographic study of "Teamsterville," a South Chicago, blue-collar neighborhood, Philipson found that "talk is negatively valued in many of the very situations

for which other American communities most highly prize speaking strategies" (1975, p. 21). Philipsen went on to note four "culturally defined places for speaking" suggesting that speaking varies in cultural contexts depending primarily on the normative pressure as felt by the interactants in the culture (1976, p. 16). Indeed, as others have aptly summarized, "Philipsen pointedly attacks the absurdity of employing in a Westside Chicago bar many of the predominately white, middle-class interpersonal skills lauded in most textbooks" (Cronen et al., 1979, p. 23). The contention here is that many of the skills prescribed in current conceptualizations of interpersonal communication competence are, in fact, specific to the white, middle-class or, are culturally-specific, while at the same time situationally-general. That is, interpersonal competence has been defined thus far within the context of white, middle-class values, while ignoring the normative "demands" of the communicative situation. Returning to Philipsen, some Teamsterville men were expected not to use talk as an appropriate response to certain situations, such as when responding to "insults directed at him or at the reputation of a woman relative or girlfriend" (1975, p. 15). One must begin to doubt at least one "necessary" criterion for interpersonal competence, that "an individual must strive to verbalize awareness" (Argyris, 1965, p. 59).

The foregoing analysis of Philipsen's Teamsterville findings is supported by Komarovsky (1962) in her case studies

of 58 blue-collar marriages. Although she selected her sample along occupational, educational and socio-economic parameters, differences between high school graduates and non-high school graduates were most notable. Komarovsky found that, in coping with marital conflict, it was the less-educated that resorted more frequently to physical aggression and that, as some males said, "talking don't do no good" and "if they'd just keep their mouths shut, everybody would be much better off" (1962, p. 191). Komarovsky concludes from her data:

The majority uphold the ideal that, in case of conflict, husbands and wives should talk things over. But this norm does not always carry the meaning that it has for the educated middle classes-a fact which illustrates that social classes may attach different meanings to what superficially appears to be a common cultural norm (1962, p. 192).

The intention of the aforementioned examples of research on blue-collar communities was to illustrate how persons in lower classes define the situational or cultural appropriateness of speaking. From these examples, one can determine that different cultures apply different evaluations to the act of speaking depending on the normative pressures prescribed by the culture in general, and by the situation in particular. Secondly, these examples serve as a beginning critical analysis of the current conceptualizations of interpersonal communication competence. Since the act of speaking is variously and differently valued depending on the community

(cf. Philipsen, 1975), and speaking, under the term self-disclosure, is almost unanimously positively valued in order to be interpersonally competent (cf. Bochner & Kelly, 1974), current conceptualizations of interpersonal competence need to be re-examined.

Current Conceptualizations of Interpersonal Competence

Interpersonal communication competence has been defined variously as one's ability to manipulate other's responses (Weinstein, 1969), one's ability to interact effectively with others (Bochner & Kelly, 1974), and one's ability to cope effectively with interpersonal relationships (Argyris, 1968). To add to these general definitions, Wieman (1977) described three approaches to interpersonal competence: the T-group approach, the social skill approach, and the self-presentation approach. Moreover, skills have been prescribed from these definitions to include: role-taking ability, ability to express feelings, self-disclosure, the ability to change and influence others, confirming one's self concept, owning feelings and thoughts, behavioral flexibility, risk-taking and giving others descriptive feedback.

Although there are few exact parallels in the terms used for the skills prescribed in interpersonal competence, some commonalities can be posited. Most authors agree that

to be interpersonally competent one should (1) be empathic; or, be able to take the role of another, (2) be behaviorally flexible; or, be able to choose an appropriate role from a large repertory of roles, (3) give descriptive, vis-à-vis evaluative, feedback to others, (4) take responsibility for one's own feelings and thoughts and (5) self-disclose one's feelings and thoughts. Therefore, an interpretation of the literature reveals a picture of the interpersonally competent communicator as one who is able and willing to be open to new situations, to disclose information and feelings freely, to risk taking another person's perspective (cf. Delia, 1977) and, generally, to be active rather than passive, and, implicitly, to be verbally active.

The aforementioned definitions and skills of interpersonal communication competence ignore the diversity and variety of many speech communities. In doing so, virtually all of the authors writing about interpersonal competence have made the error of prescribing appropriate roles and behaviors based on the dominant culture's values. These values, while not directly explicated as such, demand that persons be verbally active, self-disclose, empathize with others, and so on. Very little attention has been given to attending to our multi-cultured society. Fortunately, some recent efforts in developing culturally relative bases of interpersonal instruction have begun in this area (Cronen et al., 1979). The fact remains, however, that given current conceptualizations

of interpersonal communication competence, many persons in the United States are considered interpersonally incompetent.

It is no surprise that these "incompetent" persons are revealed most frequently in the psychotherapeutic literature. For example, as Ivey and Authier point out, about 50 percent of Asian-Americans, Blacks, Chicanos and Native Americans drop out of counseling after the first interview, while only 30 percent "Anglos" or Whites drop out (1978, p. 218). Furthermore, Sue emphasized that "many Third World clients find the values of counseling inconsistent with their life experience" (1977, p. 422). Moreover, white counselor's expectations are not always fulfilled, as Pedersen explains that "a counselor who expects counselees to verbalize feelings is not likely to have much success with Native American clients," since "the Native American is more likely to withdraw and, using the advice he has received, work out the problems by himself" (1976, p. 30).

Additionally, Jourard and Lasakow (1958) found that Blacks were unwilling to self-disclose when unsure where the counselor "is at." This finding was supported by Vontress in observing that "people of African descent are especially reluctant to disclose themselves to others, probably because of the hardships which their forbears have experienced in the United States" (1976, p. 53). Finally, Hsu (1976) summarizes what appears to be a common dilemma within each

of the cases cited above as he writes of problems of Western-trained therapists in counseling Oriental clients. Simply that "the work of the Western-trained therapist would be more rewarding to himself and more helpful to his patient if he could fit his theory and practice of psychotherapy into the Chinese cultural system instead of simply transplanting the Western one" (Hsu, 1976, p. 219).

The difficulties encountered in cross-cultural counseling are relevant to the present discussion in two ways. First, it is clear that the counseling profession is directly concerned with the communication ability, or competence, of both therapists and clients, and that this communication competence varies considerably among peoples of various cultures. Secondly, the counseling profession has begun to realize the need to evaluate clients in light of their own cultural needs and normative pressures on their behaviors (cf. Ivey & Authier, 1978; Kaneshige, 1973). In short, this profession has begun to develop a culturally relevant and sensitive posture, which is precisely the present need in current theoretical postulations of interpersonal competence. Adopting a posture of cultural relativism would enable "communication education to avoid the recurrent problem of adapting so well to the skills required or prized by specific cultures that it becomes faddish, ethnocentric, or monocultural in scope" (Cronen et al., 1979, p. 38).

Studies done in culturally diverse Hawaii reveal cases where a disparate view of interpersonal communication

competence can be found. Hawaii's population is comprised of two large subgroups, Caucasians from the Mainland United States (called haoles), and second and third generation descendants (nisei and sansei respectively) of Japanese immigrants. Each of these two groups comprise about one-third of the total population with the remainder being Chinese, Korean, Filipino and Hawaiian ancestry (Johnson & Johnson, 1975). Consistent results from various studies and the author's experience living in the Hawaii community, show definite differences in what can be considered here as interpersonally competent behaviors between haole and Japanese-American interactants (cf. Arkoff, 1959; Fenz & Arkoff, 1962; Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Kaneshige, 1973). Johnson and Johnson summarize such differences in the values placed on communication between these two groups which include a "significance of silence (or passivity) during verbal interaction, a relative lack of assertiveness," and "an exquisite sensitivity to the social status of interlocutors" as valued by Japanese-Americans in contrast with "North Americans" (1975, p. 455). Furthermore, the Japanese-American children are not rewarded for being verbally acute and, to be overly verbal, Japanese-Americans are thought to be ingratiating themselves. For Japanese-Americans, "self-disclosure has the quality of boasting, boring, or potentially dominating the other person" (Johnson & Johnson, 1975, p. 461).

The lack of emphasis on verbal skill for Japanese-Americans is contrasted with the haoles of Hawaii who are more emotionally expressive and verbose. What occurs, then, is the "clashing" of two culturally normative systems of interaction, whereby different communicative behaviors are rewarded and punished within each cultural system. So, Japanese-Americans that interact with haoles are faced with a choice of self-disclosing feelings, for example, which would be positively valued within the haole interaction system, yet negatively valued within the Japanese-American system. And, of course, haoles are faced with a complementary choice. An economy of costs and rewards results, whereby each interactant finds communication within their own culture more rewarding, and having less costs (Johnson & Johnson, 1975). Consequently, it seems that both haoles and Japanese-Americans, when faced with a cross-cultural interaction between themselves, could be viewed as incompetent within the confines of the rule structure of at least one of the cultural systems represented in the interaction. Kaneshige summarizes aptly:

Thus the Caucasian view seems to be that (a) emotional expression is good; (b) the individual who is emotionally expressive is mature and accepting of himself. The Japanese view appears to be that (a) emotional expression is a sign of immaturity; (b) one should strive for adult behavior, and emotional restraint is one example of this (1973, p. 410).

A Transcultural Model of Interpersonal Competence

The key issue in the present discussion is that, even though one could argue that interpersonal competence could, and perhaps should, be defined distinctly for each culture, the groups of people mentioned thus far have diverse ethnic, class and interactive needs and abilities, while they are subsumed in a broader, United States culture. The haoles and Japanese-Americans of Hawaii are examples of diverse cultures coexisting in a Hawaii culture, which is also an element of a larger United States Mainland culture, and so on. While this example may seem trivial to some, it gains importance when one sees that the people attempting to coordinate their interpersonal actions are faced with the same form of competence dilemma as are the interactants of Teamsterville. That is, both groups of people (cultures), as are all social actors, are under the normative pressures of the situation to exhibit the proper "face" and to maintain a competent "line of action" as defined by that particular situation (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). It is the sum effects of the situation that determines whether the actors "playing out" their actions that should define whether these actions represent competent communication. Situation is defined here as the total meanings, rules, expectations, and considerations of the "appropriateness" of the actors' actions as judged by the actors present, along with contextual variables of time,

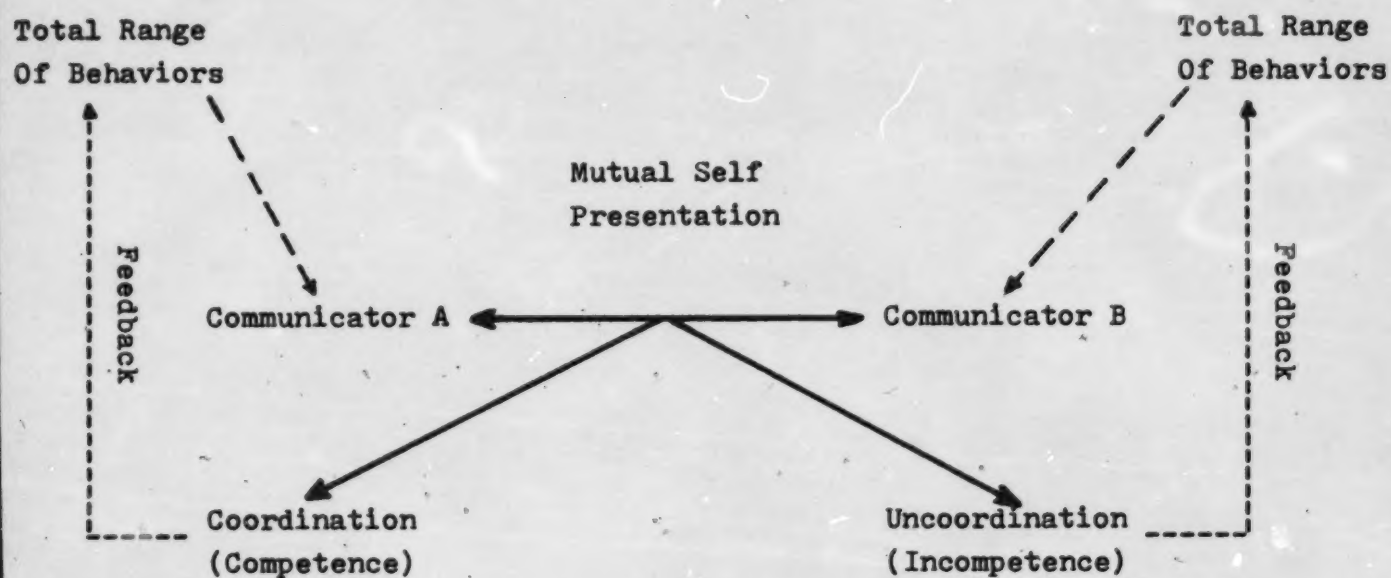
space, setting, and so on. Moreover, lest the reader be led astray, situations occur within broader, cultural communities and it would be more accurate to say that situations are not examples of cultures, but are cultures themselves. Therefore, situations are to be considered as cultures in their own right and differ mostly in the range of conceivable range of behaviors found therein. Porter offers a beginning definition of culture:

When I use the word "culture," I am referring to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, meanings, beliefs, values, attitudes, religion, concepts of self, the universe, and self-universe relationships, hierarchies of status, role expectations, spatial relations, and time concepts [which actors bring to a situation, from which they select appropriate behaviors, thereby implicitly define themselves as competent communicators; or, in selecting inappropriate behaviors, define themselves as incompetent communicators](1972, p. 3, bracketed material added).

The communicative behaviors that are to be considered examples of interpersonal competence should be, and actually are, determined in the eyes of the actors within the situation, which I have called a culture. And, as Philipsen points out: "when Americans from diverse communities-or with diverse regional, class or ethnic backgrounds-try to communicate with each other they bring to the communication encounter different underlying values about what is appropriate and proper communicative conduct" (1975, p. 22).

Figure 1 depicts a schematic view of a communicative situation between two persons, where communicator A and B

Figure 1
A Communicative Situation



draw on their respective total range of behaviors and subsequently select behaviors which are then mutually presented. The consequences of such self presentations are either a coordination between the behaviors presented by A and how B expects A to act, and vice-versa. Or, an uncoordination results from such self presentations, when the presented behaviors fail to align with what is expected as "proper" in the situation. The coordination of expected with perceived behaviors is an indication of interpersonal competence, while the degree to which the communicators fail to coordinate, one or both communicators would be considered as "incompetent." This is the essence of Stokes and Hewitt's conception of "aligning actions" as a "virtually limitless creation of culture (that is, shared definitions of situations and objects)" (1976, p. 840). To the extent communicators align their actions with each other's expectations, communicators are said to be interpersonally competent for that situation, as defined by the communicators present. One can see, then, that interpersonal competence is not a static concept, as defined here, and that one is considered as competent per situation rather than as a trait one can possess across all possible situations.

How does one know, then, when one is communicatively competent in a given situation? It is reasonable to assume that when communicators consider themselves as being competent that behaviors are being coordinated with expectations

and, in a sense, the "action" flows smoothly and, probably, below the communicator's level of consciousness. However, when incompetence prevails, little or no coordination between their behaviors and their expectations occurs, and "action" does not flow smoothly. Therefore, incompetent, uncoordinated behavior should be more easily noticed and more researchable. Study of problematic behavior has been suggested as a key to the normative structure of communicative behavior (cf. Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Stokes & Hewitt, 1976).

Problematic behavior of A would be problematic in comparison with B's (and the other actors present) expectations of A's behavior. Should A act in a problematic or untoward manner, B would not coordinate his or her behavior with A's and may call for an account for such "misbehavior." An account is defined as "a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior" (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 46). A call for an account asks "Why did you do that?," whereas, justifications or excuses may be given for the questioned behavior to account for its occurrence. For example, Philipsen observes that Teamsterville men must respond to insults directed at his "girlfriend" in nonverbal, physical ways. Men who would respond in this situation by talking it through would be violating the rule structure and may be called to account for such misbehavior (Philipsen, 1975, p. 15-16).

Further explanation of Figure 1 shows that feedback from both coordinated, or competent, and uncoordinated, or incompetent, actions affects the total range of behaviors available to each communicator. In this way, actors are guided in their future behaviors by a history of similar communicative situations. Indeed, the man of Teamsterville who is punished through repeated calls for an account of why he continues to use talk to resolve insults directed at his girlfriend, may be labeled as progressively incompetent by his peers in that situation. This becomes a central explanation for interpersonal communication competence. In the present conceptualization, actors would be predictably expected to coordinate their behaviors with others' expectations in most communicative situations since, by doing so, one is rewarded. On the other hand, to continue to fail to coordinate actions with others' expectations, actors are punished. In this light, those who have advocated a costs-and-rewards view of interpersonal competence (Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Weinstein, 1969) or of human behavior in general (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958) are correct in this part of their explications.

To summarize, the transcultural model presented here rests on the assumption that actors bring to each communicative situation their own full range of possible behaviors, from which they select a proper manner of action. Furthermore, each actor presents the selected manner of action which may

be coordinated or uncoordinated with other actors' expectations. Coordinated actions, then, are defined by the actors present in a particular situation and are considered here to be competent communication. Uncoordinated actions, as defined by the actors, are incompetent communications within the normative parameters of the situation. Culture, then, is defined as a situation comprised of communicative actions, rather than the usually vague, limited definitions of culture along national, ethnic and racial dimensions. This conceptualization forms the foundation for the implications of a transcultural model of interpersonal communication competence on interpersonal communication education and research.

Implications for Interpersonal Communication Education and Research

Many of the attitudes, concepts and skills espoused in current textbooks on interpersonal communication are prescriptions from a dominant culture (ie. white, middle-class). Although, in all fairness, these prescriptions include the postulation to be sensitive to contextual, ethnic, class and other variables (cf. Stewart & D'Angelo, 1975), the pervasive requirement of "good" interpersonal communication is that one should be verbally skilled, disclose feelings, empathic and, generally, open to taking risks with others. The skills implementing these attitudes violate the normative structures embedded in many class, ethnic, and situational communicative occurrences (cf. Cronen et al., 1979; Wieman, 1978). The

principal error responsible for the inappropriateness of such skills in certain circumstances is that the majority of the skills are prescribed from academic, theoretical, deductive processes. Few realistic attitudes and skills are induced from situational descriptions; or, explanations of communicative competence from the actor's point of view.

Herein interpersonal communication education and research coalesce. The model of interpersonal communication competence described here emphasizes an implicit criteria for situational competence. Behaviors are considered by actors as coordinated or uncoordinated within the normative structure of situations and, as such, have an "open texture." That is, the behaviors reveal coordinated, smooth actions or uncoordinated, account-filled actions which can be observed and described by the student and researcher of interpersonal communication. In this way, description of skills and attitudes in interpersonal situations should now precede theoretical prescriptions, as some have encouraged (cf. Nofsinger, 1977). Therefore, descriptive, qualitative research done by students in interpersonal communication courses serve as ways to "ground" their understandings of interpersonal communication in situations relevant to their everyday communication (cf. Hickson, 1977; Pearce, 1977). Secondly, the findings from such student research can provide data to test the current skills and attitudes espoused in interpersonal communication textbooks and courses. Finally, researchers in the field of speech communication should focus now on descriptive and comparative

studies of situational or cultural occurrences of competent communicative behaviors to induce relevant interpersonal skills for the students in interpersonal communication courses.

Acknowledgements

1. The author wishes to thank Caroline Chow, a graduate student in the Department of Applied Educational Psychology at the University of Washington, for her assistance in the cross-cultural counseling aspects of this paper.
2. The author also wishes to thank Barbara Shearer and Stella Ting-Toomey, graduate students in the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Washington, for their insights on the current state of the art concerning cultural relativism in interpersonal communication.

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